

November 24, 2021 – Thanksgiving Eve

The first Thanksgiving I can remember ... well, I don't remember the meal whatsoever.

I remember the pageant.

The preschool pageant that recalled the first Thanksgiving that history generally remembers.

Came in, asked pilgrim or Indian?

I didn't know ... went off the sound of the word.

By the time costumes were made, regretted choice

Pilgrims wore slick-looking black construction paper hats with buckles

Indians wore paper garbage bags with fringe cut

Grandma worked at Pay-Less, grocery bags a dime a dozen ... construction paper was special. Had to ask to have it bought and didn't always get a yes.

Mom came to watch the play and I was the kid nobody wanted their kid to be ... standing, grumping, singing quietly and unenthusiastically if at all

I didn't understand and I didn't feel at all thankful for the experience. I only had concern for what I liked and what I looked like.

I have a much more complex understanding now of what Thanksgiving is and what it means. It's wonderful and it's terrible. It's fantastic to be with family (already experience one round last night). It's a privilege to praise and worship God who makes the bounty we receive possible.

But it is truly awful what transpired in the years that followed the feast where the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag came together at the table. Even the dinner itself came with greater helpings of tension and relief more so than gratitude and warmth. The tribe and colonists had averted war for the

time-being and formed an uneasy alliance that didn't hold up until the next generation.

It's inauthentic to think of the heritage of Thanksgiving as being as pure as our preschool play made it out to be.

But it's not as if our tradition is irredeemable either, I believe, and it's not as if there isn't anything to celebrate at Thanksgiving even in light of what we may come to better know.

We hear in the prophet Joel the acknowledgment of the bad with the good. There is no pretending the ravages of hordes of locusts never came to Israel nor that God's people had not earned God's judgment and its consequences.

But the people of God are helped in repenting, in reconciling in relationship and in enduring the pain of the difficulty of these tasks with the vision of God completing that work in us.

God is in the midst of God's people as we struggle. And shame is not everlasting.

A banner like this, which we raised in honor of a request from descendants of native people who have survived the violent consequences of actions taken in fear, ignorance and lack of understanding ... it is not meant to lead us to wallow in guilt for the sins of the church or of nations.

It is intended to lead us into healing. To remind us as Joel 2:25 does that we can't just look away. But that in facing a problematic past honestly and intentionally, a door opens to a better future with restored relationships founded in respect and genuine care.

We don't get to skip to the end. We don't jump to dessert before we sink our teeth into the substance of what brings us to the table.

We don't get a do-over.

I certainly look differently now upon those paper bags we made our Indian costumes from. My grandmother has been gone 25 years now. If I knew then what I knew now, I might like to have done what our pastor in Tacoma did after serving his first call at Trinity Lutheran on Whidbey Island. We went over to their house after lunch one Sunday after service and saw Pastor Peter had framed a paper grocery bag with the Pay-Less Foods logo – and adorned at the bottom with a much smaller Port Townsend Paper Company logo, no less – and hung it on the wall as one fond memory of his time on the island.

The bags they have today aren't the same as the ones my grandma filled. The store's logo is different. And they don't come from Port Townsend anymore. There's no going back.

But I'm here. The family we have made is here. We all are here with the memories of past mistakes we have made

and with the learning and growth that arose from them. We are here to grow where God has planted us and to strive for the good. But to do so knowing we don't skip past God and do it on our own. We've done that -- as Jesus preached to his disciples -- and fallen short of righteousness and within it, right relationship. We are right only in leaning into God's own righteousness, with which we are gifted only by God's own grace. For that, we can give thanks, knowing *that*, which is beyond our own capacity, is what carries us through difficult reckoning and hard learning, and establishes in us true joy and real hope.

Thanks be to God.